TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Five poets reflect on the pressure to be productive

MIRA ROSENTHAL IN CONVERSATION WITH KATHY FAGAN, NOMI STONE, ED BOK LEE, AND VANDANA KHANNA

I can easily say that I would never have become a poet without the first workshop I attended as a high-school dropout earning her AA degree at the local junior college. That workshop was revelatory for me. For the first time, it gave me as a sixteen-year-old the feeling of having a voice that mattered, and I wanted to feel that way more. But something changed as I wrote my way through my MFA and PhD and creative writing postdoc. The workshop became a space that felt competitive and stifling, and I quickly found I couldn't produce anything true when I had to perform in those spaces.

I wrote the bulk of my first book, *The Local World*, while living abroad, both physically and emotionally about as far away as I could get from the performative pressures of the workshop. It helped that creative writing didn't exist as a field of study in Poland, where I was living—as the conventional wisdom goes there, if you want to be a writer, you learn by reading and writing! But I didn't have the luxury of distance with the next book, for which the pressure of the workshop was replaced by the pressure of earning tenure.

To my surprise, in therapy during the first year on the tenure track, I didn't find myself talking about my marriage or my childhood or all the things I was juggling as a mother working full-time. Instead, I talked about my relationship with poetry. If this was a midlife crisis, then it had to do with finding joy again in writing. With letting go of the pressure to climb that endless ladder of achievement and publication and pursuit of accolades. With building a sense of belonging to a community of fellow writers and artists instead. After a few months, I put the collection of sonnets I'd just completed in a drawer and started working on a whole new manuscript, one that felt like what I really wanted to be writing.

How do poets figure out what kind of writer they are for the long haul? What does it mean to maintain creative integrity, regardless of success or failure? Though it took me eleven years to publish my next book, *Territorial*, I know that the book is true. It comes from a decade of re-centering myself in the joy of writing: being so immersed in the work itself that all pressures fall away. I wrote the poems from that feeling of immersion and out of a deep sense of commitment to exploring the connection between sexual aggression and ecological exploitation. It turns out that many of the poets I admire also took this long or longer between collections. I decided to ask a few of them about how their work has evolved from what they thought it would be, what circumstances have affected their productivity, and how they stay true to their own creative pursuits, regardless of how long it takes.

MIRA ROSENTHAL In seeking out poets who take "the long view," I realized that I was implying that taking eight to ten or more years between books is somehow abnormal. Is there a typical time between collections for you?

KATHY FAGAN Mira, I was so glad to be able to discuss the issue of productivity with other poets, thank you! I haven't done the hard work of gathering stats, but it has seemed to me—and has been said since I was a young poet by older poets—that five years between books is typical. Now I realize that's just conventional wisdom; there are many poets I admire who publish much more frequently than that and many poets I adore who publish much less frequently. In my experience, it can take virtually no time to place a book (and by "no time," I mean within a year or two of completion); this was true for my first book, a National Poetry Series selection, *The Raft* (Dutton, 1985), and my third book, *The Charm* (Zoo, 2002), both now sadly out of print. But my second book, *MOVING & ST RAGE* (University of North Texas, 1999), took fourteen years from start to finish, and those fourteen years felt excruciating to me.

ED BOK LEE For poetry, it's been an average of seven years between each book.

VANDANA KHANNA The time frame between my books has varied, depending on my life circumstance. My first collection came out four years after I finished my MFA (it was actually my Master's thesis). It took about another 13 years before my second book was published. In those intervening years, I worked several jobs, had three children (including a set of twins), and tried to figure out how to manage enough time and energy to write. It was a difficult period—juggling three kids under the age of five, part-time teaching, and trying to keep that elusive feeling of being an artist alive. My forthcoming book will be out in 2023, nine years after my second, a relatively short(er) time frame given my track record.

NOMI STONE My first book of poems, *Stranger's Notebook*, came out in 2008, and my second book, *Kill Class,* came out in 2019, 11 years later. In between, I also wrote an academic book, *Pinelandia: An Anthropology and Field Poetics of War and Empire* (University of California Press, 2022). Now, just three years after my last book of poems, I am nearly finished with my next manuscript of poems, *You Could Build a World This Way*. I was startled by this progression, this relatively quick uncorking on the heels of the prior book.

MIRA How do you keep the creative flow going during the longer stretches between collections?

KATHY In the story of my first to second book timeline, it's clear that my own life and writing paths, together with the publishing industry, played equally significant roles. I've talked and written about those years elsewhere. In the interest of brevity then, I'll say only that the second book was, I thought, nearly finished in 1991, when my best friend died, and I stopped writing altogether. When I returned to poetry three years later, I realized I needed to make a different book. Ten years had passed; support for my early work had waned. I submitted *MOVING & ST RAGE* to many contests and publishing houses before the marvelous poet T. R. Hummer chose it to win the Vassar Miller Prize. I had the pleasure of thanking him again very recently for welcoming me back into poetry; his decision changed my life.

VANDANA I had to figure out what kind of writer I was outside of the classroom, when the only free time I had was on evenings and weekends. Two days after graduating, I moved from a small college town in Indiana to Los Angeles and started working full-time, far away from the insulated world of workshops and mentors that had made up the bulk of my writing life up to that point. Living and writing outside of academia was both liberating and also extremely scary. I'd never really tried writing without the constant feedback of a collective group of readers.

ED As I've noted elsewhere, most mornings I sit down and write with the goal of just getting lost in some kind of inner spaciousness; like some sea creature slowly descending into a massive, intricate sea forest of plants and coral, atavistically seeking something vital and only of that deeper world. Eventually, the sea creature emerges, ideally free of all the algae and crud that had formerly been on its scales or skin. After some years, I have a body of poems that are thematically connected, because they were all written during a given time period in my life. Our bodies are constantly turning over new cells, but scientists believe that every seven to fifteen years, our bodies have more or less completely been revised cellularly. So, on that timescale, I'm not so slow.

NOMI My first two books of poetry were each driven by decade-long intellectual obsessions qne extensive research. *Stranger's Notebook* was driven by my fieldwork within a very traditional Jewish community, on an island off the coast of North Africa, and a desire to reckon with my own relationship—as a Rabbi's daughter—to faith and ritual, community and belonging. That book evolved as I pursued a Master's in Middle Eastern Studies to contextualize that inquiry. I wrote my second book, *Kill Class*, in tandem with getting my PhD in Anthropology, to push further on questions of nation, power, and violence (and the rage and sorrow these elicited in me). *Kill Class* is based on two years of fieldwork in mock Middle Eastern villages constructed by the US military around America for war trainings. Halfway through writing it, I began an MFA at Warren Wilson. I couldn't write the poems I needed to write without more demanding craft training.

MIRA What kinds of things contributed to the shorter timeframes between some of your collections?

VANDANA Working on the forthcoming collection, I felt more assured of my process, of my voice, of the vision I wanted to put out into the world. I think all that time, effort, and uncertainty in my early career has benefited my writing in numerous ways.

KATHY I've published four more books since my second collection, constituting a range of three to fourteen years between books. Since joining the terrific indie publisher Milkweed, I've hit that magical five-years-between-books mark with

my two most recent collections. As we know, it's expensive and time-consuming to shop manuscripts as an unrepresented poet. To my mind, a publisher who commits to your work is a very large piece of the productivity puzzle, and yet only a fortunate few of us benefit from that essential relationship. I feel as strongly as ever about facilitating independent presses (i.e., buying books, attending readings, and supporting fundraisers) so that poets can focus on their writing instead of marketing their writing.

NOMI My third book in progress, *You Could Build a World This Way*, is a whole other creature, more of a synthesis, finally: of the world, of my life, of all that I have experienced and known and read and felt in my own particular skin by the age of 40. The poems tell the story of my wife carrying our son and the particular worldbuilding entailed in queer family-making. The poems are also populated with marine biologists and octopus dissections, botanists and chanterelle-foragers—and my encounters with scientists and others I've become friends with on the island of Mull off the West Coast of Scotland, my wife's beloved home. But this book is not trying to understand a particular community or a problem the way that the previous two were. It has been much faster to write due to this very specific and ripening convergence of forces: a fatigue with the distance of research; the abundance I've felt since the birth of my child; my own readiness to truly pair deep thinking with deep feeling; and having the adequate craft training by this time to make the moves I want to make as a poet.

MIRA I also found that the experience of having kids propelled me into a whole other way of writing. It certainly changed the availability of time and slowed down my writing process in some ways. But it was also an integral experience to each of my books. My first book came out of that feeling of needing to unsilence psychological trauma, to voice it for the sake of my children. And my second book, which addresses the sexual aggression that young girls have to navigate, is dedicated to my daughters. I wouldn't have written either of these books had I not become a mother. I'm interested in any similar interplays between your writing and your everyday life, be it demands on time, material for your poems, adjacent work, or anything else.

ED My last collection of poems, *Mitochondrial Night*, was dedicated to my mother, who was a child war refugee, and from whom I've inherited all my mitochondrial DNA (which, for all of us, is passed exclusively on the maternal line, all the way back to a mystery woman scientists refer to as Mitochondrial Eve). A lot of the poems came from the time just after the birth of my daughter, my mother's only granddaughter. Being with, observing my daughter in her early years (and still, now) have made me reflect deeply on what it was like for my mother when she was a child in North Korea: who she was then and has now become, and the role that history and politics can play in the shaping of us all, individually and collectively.

MIRA How interesting that a number of us felt spurred on to write (or to write differently) during the time period around the birth of our children.

NOMI Being a mother has a technicolor quality to it that has become integral to my new poems. I'm interested especially in the renaming of the world entailed in parenthood. I think this is part of writing poetry, period, i.e., the enchantment of language as it meets seeing; though being a parent reminds me of that process in a particular deliberate, externalizing way. I watch my wife teach my son the names of mushrooms, of mosses, of flowers—I remember when he was three months old and she pointed to the ground where the early tiny apricot-colored nubs were pushing through: "these are chanterelles, they look like buttons now. Then they turn to trumpets." And there it was, the world again; it sang.

VANDANA When I became a mother for the first time, I was wholly unprepared for the upheaval to my life and to my identity as a writer that would come with it. I knew about the time constraints, but it was the constant vigilance, the physical and spiritual responsibilities for caretaking, the sheer space that parenthood took up in the brain, that was unexpected. It's the worry that never ends. None of these concerns have explicitly made it into my poems, but they have shaped the way I think about larger issues of equality, mothering, and being an artist in the world: what division of labor means in reality, how to live as a writer and a parent without the freedoms that I once had as a younger self.

KATHY I understand caretaking challenges for working artists, and I also understand more thoroughly than ever before why and how details of these traditional women's roles—from domestic chores to navigating healthcare for loved ones—bleed into their art, being an all-consuming world of material in and of itself. I was able to grieve my mother's death, explore economic class and intergenerational trauma, come to grips with my own childlessness, and follow my father's dementia journey forward and backward in my new book, *Bad Hobby*. Most of it, in fact, was written while my dependent father lived with me for five years before moving into a memory-care facility nearby. As someone responsible for supporting a family, growing a graduate program, and attending to domestic duties, I can say unequivocally that I would have produced more work had I not shouldered those responsibilities. But how many among us can or would want to avoid such lives?

MIRA Exactly! I've been thinking about how the practice of poetry—and the practice of living our lives deeply—feels antithetical to the capitalistic love of efficiency, the desire to have the next new thing. Every word in a poem is considered, sometimes for hours! How do you deal with the pressure to be productive? What other pressures interfere with taking the time that you need to develop a collection?

NOMI I always think of capitalism as a utilitarian line: getting the thing done, extracting something from someone. Adorno and Horkheimer describe how the opposite is a "spiral"—and maybe it is only through this spiral in approaching each other and our work that true tenderness is possible. I try to treat my poems as spirals too: they go forward and backward; language and epiphany need to ripen. And I do spend months, or sometimes years, thinking through a single word or line in a poem. Many of the sweetnesses in my life right now are slow like this: the hours with my one-year-old son as he practices standing up on his own, stumbles, falls, laughs, stands. Simultaneously, I am a tenure-track professor in poetry, and I have to list my publications for my Dean every year. It is hard to balance. Sometimes in the wake of this pressure, I feel pressured to submit something before it is truly done. My wife, the fiction writer Rose Skelton, is my first and best reader, and she always tells me to wait if something isn't done.

ED For me, being a poet, in a way, is like being a professional lover of things. At some richly meaningful level, you have to truly love what you're writing about for it to engage with you in a meaningful way. I've written and published some poems and other things that feel like flings; and, for me, though thrilling in a way, that can easily become tinged by a deeper sense of self-betrayal.

MIRA I know what you both mean about publishing something that doesn't feel ready or that feels like a fling. Part of my impulse for having this conversation is the publication of my second book this fall, eleven years after my first. I have another manuscript tucked away in a drawer that I wrote in between and that I still love. Many of the poems have been published individually. But at some point, I realized that I didn't want it to be my second book. Tonally, it wasn't what I wanted to put out into the world right now.

KATHY First of all, congratulations on the second book! Second, I think it's very healthy to withhold work around the time of a book's publication, for any number of reasons. Decisions to include poems in our books, or submit the poems to journals, or send manuscripts out at all, are thankfully entirely ours to make.

VANDANA Early on in my writing life, I was quite hard on myself if I didn't write regularly or if that writing didn't "yield" something I deemed "useful." I think one of the main pressures that has shaped me as a writer is financial insecurity. Growing up on the cusp of the middle class, both my parents had "jobs" rather than careers. I started working part-time at the age of 14 and never looked back. The idea of being a writer was a dream that I kept to myself, scribbling away into a notebook for years. The only way I made it to grad school was by applying for fellowships and working two jobs while taking classes.

Thankfully, I have learned to surrender—to life, to work, to children, to the uncertainty that comes with practicing an artform that doesn't necessarily yield measurable results. In the writing life, there are cycles of productivity and rest, and the key for me is to accept the rest when it comes, to stop fighting against the realities of my life, and to try and incorporate the struggle into my craft.

KATHY I've experienced the pressure to be productive and found it can be generative or damaging or some combination of the two. Certainly, as a university professor my productivity has been scrutinized annually and, except for earning tenure and promotion, I can't say rewards have been commensurate with effort. A community of writers, however, which I hope my colleagues and I have contributed to making alongside our creative writing students, can apply a very different kind of collective pressure that is supportive, nurturing, and illuminating. Also, reading poets whose talents are the opposite of your own or, for that matter, just a block or two ahead of your own, can be very re-invigorating. I do it myself all the time and suggest poets to my students constantly, too.

MIRA One last question, which has to do with timeliness. Given that it can take some of us a decade to complete a collection, how do you negotiate the competing tensions of personal urgency vs. cultural relevance in what you write?

KATHY When I consider your term "personal urgency," I immediately think of Dickinson, a poet we read now whose work was not known in her lifetime. I think of Keats, whose personal urgency was clearly not greeted as a "cultural necessity" in his short life. There are many well-known examples such as these, and many tragically unknown examples of poets not recognized for their merits, either during their lifetimes or after.

We know poets who are routinely successful promoting their work, or who touch a cultural nerve that propels them toward broader recognition. This has always been the case, and it's good for poetry in general because it widens readership overall. I'm not optimistic enough to believe that all important work is as well received as it should be, but I'm not cynical enough to think that popular reception is all that matters either. One significant difference I'm encouraged by today compared to four decades ago is how many kinds of poetries are being made by such a wide variety of practitioners, many of whom have very fresh expectations of how their work should land, why and for whom. Having come up in an era in which I was told what I should and shouldn't be writing about, how I should or shouldn't write about it, and where I should and shouldn't publish it, I'm deeply satisfied to see new poets, any poet, flip the bird to all that. As Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

VANDANA I don't tend to write poems based off of a cultural moment or event as the inciting impulse. I can't ever seem to harness my anger, or outrage, or urgency in any articulate, competent way. It takes me time, often years, to process events into coherent lines of poetry that might translate even a fraction of emotions that I want to express (sometimes words fail us). I write what I feel personally connected to, which tends to be less about a cultural moment and more about timeless, universal issues like the precarious place of women and girls in the world (a theme that always feels urgent and timely). Thus, the connection between the personal and the universal often seem intertwined in my work.

NOMI There is almost always a lag-time for me with a poem, between the writing and the publishing: usually the poem is wrenched from my body hot then honed for years. I published a poem once in *Poetry* magazine about my wife in the past tense: the first year we were first together, we broke up for three months. It's a poem of the most colossal grief. But my wife now jokes about the poem because then time reversed and love returned. A handful of people I don't know have written to me about that poem, and how they have reread it through times of loss (romantic loss in some cases, but also a death). So, the poem lives; it outlives. Any poem I am proud of has the possibility of an afterlife that exceeds my own personal experience and urgency.

ED You could say that everyone alive today won the most improbable lottery when they were born. What is this impossible gift of being born to live and experience all that there is to be experienced in your life and the ever-changing world? What does it really say or mean when a billionaire kills herself after losing half her fortune in a "bad luck" turn of the market one afternoon (especially after "good luck" turns of events rose her to those very riches in the first place)? I don't know if we as humans are equipped to judge whether something is a success or failure; or whether the timing of anything was good or bad in the long run. I really just try to always trust myself in my observation and experience of the radically obvious. When the trust feels to be flailing, it's usually because I'm not trusting myself radically enough.
